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Experts Tell Of Soviet Arms Woes

Lagging Technology, Shaky Allies Cited

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The Soviet Union faces serious new military problems because of a decline in the quality and reliability of its Warsaw Pact allies and a need to modernize its own forces, according to two Reagan administration specialists.

"The value [of the east European armies] is diminishing . . . creating serious problems for Soviet strategy in Europe," Dale Herspring, deputy director of the State Department's office of east European affairs, said yesterday at the Smithsonian Institution's Wilson Center.

A specialist in Warsaw Pact affairs, Herspring said the east Europeans "are not doing the minimal" to modernize their forces, so the "Soviets have to make changes on the western front." One step they may take, he said, is "to station more troops in the area."

In addition, changing military technologies are creating "dilemmas" for the Soviet Union, according to Lt. Gen. William E. Odom, assistant Army chief of staff for intelligence and one of the administration's top specialists on Moscow's defense policies.

Kremlin leaders may try to ease this situation through arms control negotiations and a resumption of East-West trade in strategic materials, Odom said in a Wilson Center presentation last month.

"It seems cruel to Soviet leaders [that] after 20 years of struggle to get ahead, they find themselves with an analogous struggle to stay ahead," Odom said in his earlier presentation.

Although both officials said they were giving their own opinions, their views expanded on Secretary of State George P. Shultz's statement last month before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States has "reason to be confident that the 'correlation of forces' is shifting back in our favor."

Soviet problems, Odom said, stem from the Reagan administration's adoption of "technologies of change" in weaponry, such as electronic miniaturization in "smart weapons" and directed-energy systems such as lasers for range-finding and guidance.

President Reagan's strategic defense research program, known as "Star Wars," also is a challenge of "enormous dimensions" to the Soviets, Odom said.

Two questions facing Kremlin leaders, Odom said, are: "Can Soviet scientists support [future] military needs?" and "Can Soviet production meet [the more stringent] demands and higher per-unit costs" of such weapons?

Future Soviet military success, Odom said, may hinge on obtaining a favorable arms control agreement with the United States and being able to resume trade with the West in key technological areas.

In answer to a question, Odom said the Soviet military situation could be affected "rather significantly . . . to the extent that eastern Europe drags its feet on modernization."

In wartime, Odom said, internal Warsaw Pact unrest regarding Moscow "could be a potential advantage to the West." But, he added, "without policies in the West to give vague hopes" to the eastern Europeans, "we have no way to take advantage of it." He did not elaborate on "give vague hopes."

Herspring said yesterday that in the event of war the Soviets "will need a quick, successful campaign. If they suffer reverses or a stalemate, they will have problems" keeping Warsaw Pact forces on their side.

A widening gap in military equipment is making it difficult to integrate Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces, Herspring said. While the Soviets fly modern MiG29 jet fighters, he said, the pact countries are armed mostly with older MiG21s. In tanks, he said, the east Europeans still have the T54, almost 30 years old and, he said, "the only Russian tank still vulnerable to NATO antitank weapons."

One way the Soviets appear to be working at the problem is by reorganizing its divisions in eastern Europe to fight independently of its allies.

Herspring said the performance of the Polish army since Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski took over in 1981 "does not show the Polish military is reliable, even on internal matters."

The military was "useful," he added, "provided it was not asked to lock and load" a gun. "If you do ask that," he said, "you do not know who they will shoot at . . . maybe their officers."